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WHERE DO I COME FROM? WHAT AM I? WHERE AM I GOING?  
THE PROBLEM OF SELF-DISCOVERY IN ART MAKING AS RESEARCH INQUIRY

Edward Hanfling

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## WHERE DO I COME FROM? WHAT AM I? WHERE AM I GOING? THE PROBLEM OF SELF-DISCOVERY IN ART MAKING AS RESEARCH INQUIRY

Edward Hanfling

Art schools situated within tertiary education institutions have, in recent decades, established art making as a form of research, variously called practice-based research, practice-led research and practice as research. Artists working within academia are assessed on their research outputs, while fostering rigorous research methods amongst their students (most explicitly at postgraduate level). But compared to other academic disciplines, it can be difficult to clearly identify the research contribution of an artwork or art project. This is especially the case with works and projects that focus largely on self-expression and self-discovery – where the artist is both the researcher and the subject of the research inquiry. Such cases continue to be prevalent within art schools, despite students' exposure to a range of theoretical and cultural frameworks that question individualism and anthropocentrism – from the post-structuralist challenge to originality to post-humanist notions of distributed agency to the collectivism of *te ao Māori*.

Recent phenomena, such as the narcissism of social media, the isolation of COVID lockdowns, the destigmatisation of mental health and the wellness industry may have contributed to the tendency for tertiary art students to turn in on themselves and become self-preoccupied, even self-indulgent, in their approach. This article considers the legitimacy of self-discovery in art making as research inquiry, looking for guidance to values and conventions both art historical and associated with the contemporary art world (the 'industry' or field that ostensibly shapes art school pedagogy).

The first section, "There is no 'I' in research," presents the argument that "practice as research" exceeds the simple self-expression found in some art "practice." It notes, however, the influential history of expressionist artists such as Paul Gauguin, who were seen to have expressed their inner sense of self, according to the romantic trope, but in fact registered productive tensions between 'self' and 'world'.

The second section, "The 'I' in research," examines possibilities for autobiographical research projects, drawing comparisons between art practice as research and autoethnography, and suggesting that both depend on an acknowledged relational sense of self. It proceeds to examine examples of contemporary art practice that challenge individualism and self-scrutiny in contemporary culture.

The third section, "Where am I going?," takes up the idea that the originality or research contribution of an art-making project rests in tensions or dissonances between the artist and their environment and materials. The case study presented here is a Master's painting project, which shows the artist steering away from an expressionist manner towards more unpredictable collaborations with non-human factors.

Ultimately, this article raises as many questions as answers about what differentiates practice as research from practice more generally. There can be no purely self-expressive art; any artwork will reveal that the self is always already not the self; the artist is embedded in a welter of human and non-human connections. In practice as research, however, it is possible to identify problems with self-indulgence, as well as the benefits of the researcher deliberately tackling potentially dissonant relationships with the world around them.

## THERE IS NO 'I' IN RESEARCH

'Practice as research' refers to methods and values fostered within tertiary-level art schools, particularly at postgraduate level. The term identifies a difference between a kind of critically informed and appraised contemporary art from which art schools take their cue, on the one hand, and other kinds of art – contemporary in the loose sense of something that is done now, but popular, commercial or amateur. Those are descriptions, not judgements, because all art has value for somebody. But within the contemporary art world and within art schools, judgements are legitimately made to distinguish art that connects and extends (disciplines, fields, issues, communities, concepts, sites) from that made for purely therapeutic reasons ("I make it for me"). The art school and the art world have a reciprocal relationship. Values and conventions upheld within academia derive from the wider field of practice. But there are differences too. In the exhibiting venues of the art world, the research behind an artwork is not always spelled out. In academia, because artworks cannot be merely assumed to embody knowledge, the research contribution must be communicated additionally through documentation of process and written and oral contextualisation, with reference to established fields of practice and theory.<sup>1</sup> However, compared to other academic disciplines, the research contribution of an artwork or art project can be difficult to clearly identify or demonstrate.

Certainly, originality and innovation are indelibly associated with the history of art, not least since the emergence of the mid-late nineteenth-century avant-garde, or, backtracking, the expressive romantic genius. Unfortunately, these models of making are often misconstrued as simply self-expression and self-discovery. Consider Paul Gauguin's monumental 1897 painting, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Vigorous paint-handling and amplified, almost intoxicating, colours suggest his concern with heightened states of mind and feeling. Along with Vincent van Gogh and Edvard Munch, Gauguin is rightly seen to have shifted painting away from what things look like and toward the subjective and emotional experience of the artist, paving the way for generations of 'expressionists' in the twentieth century. However, as egregiously self-possessed as Gauguin evidently was, and however symptomatic his art might be of personal (and, to the viewer, incomprehensible) neuroses and fantasies, or indeed of his desperate personal circumstances, the title of his 'masterpiece,' along with the allegorical, female-centric imagery, nonetheless signals an attempt to penetrate broader human truths than his own immediate emotions: it says "We," not "I."

Gauguin would not have thought about his paintings as 'practice,' let alone 'practice as research,' and his 'concepts' were wildly grandiose. Yet they reflect an attitude of persistent searching, and an inquiry into tensions between his sense of self and his social and material environments, registering the symptoms of modernity (in France and Tahiti) and wider (mis)understandings of the 'primitive' basis of human life. This was not just an outpouring of "unfettered subjectivity."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Gauguin and other historical 'expressionists' offer compelling precedents for treating art as a means of communicating individual 'truths,' and it may even be the case that the contemporary art world (as distinguished above from popular and other expressions of creativity) admits such practices. Here, then, despite the fact that art school pedagogy takes its cues from the art world, it becomes necessary to distinguish between 'practice,' as it takes place out in that world, and 'practice as research,' as it takes place in academia.

Practice as research is expected to communicate new knowledge or "substantial new insights."<sup>3</sup> Arguably, an artist, whether or not affiliated with a research institution, could produce such insights simply by putting their work out in the world, making it available to an audience, thereby changing that world, and that audience, even if ever so slightly – modifying perceptions, opening up new ways of seeing, thinking and feeling, sparking discussion. But when the work seems primarily to invite discussion only of the artist themselves – when it is an introspective, solipsistic reflection on matters peculiar to the individual, their state of mind, opinions, preoccupations – then it becomes more difficult to justify as research or to shape into a research project.

While artists are frequently heard to utter such self-justifying phrases as "I do it for myself" or "I need to be true to myself," a respected researcher in, say, the humanities or sciences, would be unlikely to couch their activities in such terms. Research carries a duty to an audience and discipline.

Of course, artists justifiably demand freedom from expectation; there is no point in consciously trying to make art to satisfy a certain group of people or make a conspicuous, tangible difference in the world. You probably have to really want to do what you are doing, be sure of your own identity as a person and an artist and insulate yourself against the demands of the art world and the art market if you are going to keep at making art. Perhaps such an attitude is conducive to making a research contribution, too. But there is also the danger that it might replicate that which is already known and familiar in contemporary life.

The prevailing cultural climate is one that might well drive the art student towards a self-expressive mode of making. Online social networking platforms, while sometimes enabling connection, including whakapapa relationships,<sup>4</sup> are also breeding grounds for narcissism and self-absorption,<sup>5</sup> and for manipulative messages of self-empowerment, all demanding buy-in (literally) to neo-liberal individualism through the illusion of discovering the 'true self'. The lure of self-improvement through body image is brilliantly speared in Amalia Ulman's 2014 Instagram performance, *Excellences & perfections*, in which she appears to undergo a transformative makeover; including breast reduction, to a mix of encouraging and horrified responses from her followers; the artwork turns out to be *about* self-expression, rather than an instance of it. The online world is dominated by the outward exposure of acts of personal inward scrutiny, and COVID lockdowns have seemingly intensified this tendency, registering the retreat of students into isolation, away from the campus, and the ensuing focus on self that this inevitably engenders.<sup>6</sup> The gradual destigmatisation and diagnosing of mental health conditions has also contributed to the emergence of a generation who are hyper-aware of their own moods and mind-states, and willing to reveal them to others – haunting alienation captured in a photographic self-portrait or paint-splattered nightmarish visions.

For the artist researcher, publicly exhibiting personal issues could raise ethical concerns. 'Potential harm' is a concept applied in research ethics to consider whether the risks of a research project involving human participants are outweighed by the benefits, or mitigated by the methods adopted.

Harm can be psychological, physical or reputational, and can befall the researcher themselves, not just their participants, when dealing with traumatic issues or events. Art projects typically do not involve human participants (audience members are generally not considered participants, because data is not collected or analysed and they are not the subjects of study), but where an artist is delving into their own experience, which might be of an unsettling or upsetting nature, there is the potential for deteriorating mental health or for personal revelations the exposure of which might sooner or later be regretted. Research typically involves a considerable investment of time, and if that time is spent reflecting upon one's state of mind, the researcher might find themselves in a black hole of anguish, anxiety, depression and self-denigration. Perhaps sharing these feelings is therapeutic for the researcher and helpful for others with similar experiences, but equally it could be humiliating and damaging.

In studying towards a degree or postgraduate qualification, pursuing research on top of practice, there are grounds for ensuring that you are doing more than simply satisfying yourself. Besides potentially being uninteresting to anyone other than the artist, self-preoccupied art resists interpretation or assessment, for there is no means of measuring or demonstrating the extent to which the work is or is not true to the artist's own sense of self.

Australian art history and theory professor Andrew McNamara's "Six rules for practice-led research" includes, at number two, "Avoid recourse to one's own experience as the basis or justification of the research ambition."<sup>7</sup> (And that comes hot on the heels of rule 1: "Eliminate – or at the very least, limit – the use of the first person pronoun, 'I,' as a centrepiece of a research formulation."<sup>8</sup>) McNamara elaborates:

Should the goal of PLR be to make sense of a practitioner's own life or experience? ... Sorry, but the answer is 'no'! Rather, the goal of research – in all its forms – should be to explain something of significance and of broader relevance to a research community; this may be a larger, cross-disciplinary research community, or it may be a wider public audience.<sup>9</sup>

His parting shot: "Always remember: the criterion ... remains its contribution to knowledge, not to psychotherapy!"<sup>10</sup>

## THE 'I' IN RESEARCH

More amenable to self-expression in practice as research is another Australian art academic, Robert Nelson, in his book *The Jealousy of Ideas*. Even so, he feels compelled to admit: "In no other discipline would autobiography be academically acceptable."<sup>11</sup> In fact, autobiographical modes of research are respected across numerous disciplines, particularly in the social sciences and humanities – anthropology, history and education – not to mention the literary genre of autobiography itself. Of autobiography in history, Jaume Aurell and Rocio G Davis conclude: "Texts that blend life writing and history deserve scholarly attention because of the ways they allow us to examine our access to both individual and collective pasts."<sup>12</sup>

A useful comparison with the role of the self in art practice as research can be found in the literature on autoethnography, a research method widely applied across a range of disciplines, and, like art, relatively recently accepted as legitimate academic research. In autoethnography, the researcher's own experience forms the primary data, leading to the possibility, as in artistic expression, of outcomes that are of little relevance to others,<sup>13</sup>

or seem self-indulgent.<sup>14</sup> The credibility of autoethnography rests on the way it draws attention to, firstly, a widespread wilful blindness to the presence of subjectivity in all research methods, and, conversely, on an acknowledgement of the extent to which the researcher's perceptions and experiences are *not* subjective, but rather shaped by innumerable social and cultural influences and interactions. Perhaps, likewise, the foregrounding of the self in practice as research might be evaluated on the extent to which it evidences an awareness of the 'I' as embedded, entangled, multiple, changing and relational, not autonomous, self-governing or unique. For Arthur P Bochner, a leading exponent of autoethnography, the basis of his method is not narcissism but "connection,"<sup>15</sup> and a "relational ethics of caring and community."<sup>16</sup> Or as Jane Edwards puts it, "Writing autoethnographic accounts of self-experience necessarily involves others."<sup>17</sup>

Art history and theory or contextual courses taught within art school programmes routinely emphasise this relational sense of self, charting the various tendencies in post-1960s theory that challenge the autonomy of the individual and the assumption that the meaning or content of an artwork comes purely from 'within,' from heart and soul. They give account of post-structuralism and post-modernism, identity as a product of language, social and cultural contexts and systems, the 'death of the author,' the loss of faith in originality or the artwork as a unique manifestation of a unique individual. Histories of feminism and theories of cultural identity reveal personal stories or lived experience, but always in solidarity with larger social justice causes and activist movements. More recently, the 'material turn' has provided a popular framework for emphasising that authorship is distributed across a network of non-human 'actants,' and that materials have lives that matter, too.

Also increasingly visible are indigenous frameworks of knowledge that espouse collectivism rather than individualism. This is admirably reflected, in the wider field of practice, by the mahi of the Mata Aho Collective (Erena Baker, Sarah Hudson, Bridget Reweti and Terri Te Tau). If pedagogical principles and judgements derive from the values of the contemporary art world, the Walters Prize, Aotearoa New Zealand's most prestigious and lucrative art award, held bi-annually at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki with an exhibition of four finalists and a prize of NZ\$50,000, should be seen as a critical precedent. In 2021, the Prize was awarded to the Mata Aho Collective and Maureen Lander for their collaborative installation, *Atapō* (2020).

The judge, Kate Fowle, director of MoMA PSI, New York, could not travel to Auckland to see the finalists' exhibition due to COVID restrictions. Noting that the four nominated artworks "bring nuanced perspectives on social, cultural and political urgencies of our time that each deserve our attention and engagement," she opted not to evaluate the works themselves, but rather to celebrate the ethos of collaboration that underpinned the work of the Mata Aho Collective and Lander.<sup>18</sup> One might be wary of rhetoric that romanticises collaboration as a simplistic reaction against the avant-garde's romanticisation of the individual, especially given that we all automatically operate within tacit collectives that include the input of languages, existing practices and theories, materials, implements, animals

and environmental factors. Nonetheless, Fowle's Walters Prize judgement registers the relevance of challenges to Western individualism in recent art history. As Lucy Lippard states, "Collaboration – the social extension of the collage aesthetic – has long been an antidote to the powerful sense of alienation that characterises late capitalism, which divides and separates through specialisation at the same time that it homogenises."<sup>19</sup>

## WHERE AM I GOING?

Self-discovery is a common theme within student art projects, and need not, in itself, undermine the credibility of such projects as research. Personal interest is presumably the reason for any research project to exist at all. Indeed, there is ample evidence for the impossibility of altogether disregarding or suppressing the role of personal feeling or subjectivity. Even the most seemingly impersonal and systems-based artforms of the 1960s – colour field painting, minimalism, pop art, conceptual art – have been found to have failed to eliminate the subjective 'I,' and to rather betray, as Eve Meltzer puts it, "the artist's profound and rather amorous attachment"<sup>20</sup> to a visual language that signifies "objectivity and scientificity"<sup>21</sup> – an emotional renunciation of emotion, as it were.

However, there is a sense in which the artist as researcher is required to renounce their own sense of self, and to ask not "who am I?" but "where am I going?" The research process might involve letting go of certain preconceptions about who they are, and about the art as an expression of an immutable sensibility. This would accord with David Rousell and Fiona Fell's "vision of arts education as a collective process of becoming a work of art, rather than an individual process of becoming an artist;"<sup>22</sup> and with Simon O'Sullivan's suggestion that art can be a "technology of contact with an outside to our 'selves' as well as a name for the different kinds of assemblages and constructions that follow from this contact."<sup>23</sup> The research contribution of an artwork, then, might be described as what happens when an artist registers and reflects on dissonances or collisions between self, subject, materials, field, discipline and world.

Amanda Watson had an established career as a (loosely speaking) abstract expressionist painter before she embarked on the Master of Arts that she completed at Wintec, Hamilton, in 2019. Her paintings were built up in layers of gestural mark-making, sometimes with elements of geometry, the combination evocative of both 'natural' and architectural environments. She described her work as "personal," but informed by her experience of people and places, the forms and gestures bound up "in the processes and systems that occur in the natural environment."<sup>24</sup> The relational sense of self was already acknowledged in the practice before undertaking a practice as research project.

The project, however, led Watson to ask further questions about her relationship to the environment and to her medium, and she sought a process of making that reduced her own conscious control and increased the potential for revealing how places and materials acted upon her. She would trek large, loose canvases through difficult terrain and dense bush, laying them over rocks and between plants, pouring ink onto the crumpled surfaces, gathering indexical traces that were then supplemented by studio-based phases working from memory, photographs and feelings. The resulting pictures, such as *Whaingaroa Raglan, April 2018 & March 2019*; *Near the Source of the Kapuni River, Taranaki June 2019*; *In My Studio in Hamilton 2019* (2020), have a density of visual information, rich and detailed, but impervious to any obvious interpretation, nor immediately beguiling or beautiful. Watson's methodology drew from Donna Haraway's belief that new knowledge emerges from unpredictable encounters between people and other beings and things.<sup>25</sup> In reflecting on the project, Watson writes of the awkwardness of these encounters, but also the freedom of limiting her own sphere of influence on the work.<sup>26</sup> She does not overstate the latter: "I hope that this approach to painting has reduced my agency as artist slightly."<sup>27</sup> The significance of the research lies in a body of complex pictorial works, tracing conscious, difficult and unpredictable shifts in the artist's interactions with places and materials.

## CONCLUSION

The notion of research as the individual pursuit of new knowledge resonates equally with the artist as with the academic, one buried in the studio (or perhaps starving in a garret), the other in the ivory tower. The romantic artist trope, however (or the artist as “queer fish,” as Rudolf Wittkower put it),<sup>28</sup> culminated in the attitude that art could not be studied in an academy at all. The very existence of art schools presupposes the possibility of communities of practice, and of collaborations both strategic and tacit, between people and their environments and materials. In art practice as research, a primary focus on the self can lead to a state of stasis and delusion. The artist who believes they are staying true to who they think they are can end up, ironically, misrepresenting themselves as just one, obdurate self out of a complex assemblage of selves, finding only what they already know about who they are, rather than what their work might become.

Research demands movement, a spirit of ceaseless, curious inquiry, embracing the unfamiliar, confronting what is not yet known or understood. An artist might turn in on themselves precisely because they find there a familiar constant (or the illusion of one) in their struggle with an incomprehensible world-out-there – at least, that is the romantic or expressionist cliché. Practice as research is an inquiry not just into what that struggle means for the artist, but what it means for others and for a discipline or field. Ideally, the research effects some change, albeit small, in both the researcher and the fields and disciplines with which they engage.

**Edward Hanfling** is an art historian and critic, who teaches art history and theory and supervises postgraduate research at the Dunedin School of Art. His research primarily focuses on the modernist era and on issues of judgement and value.

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